



THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH (RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS) IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to raise a Christian (Church or other religious institutions) voice in support of determined action to tackle environmental problems through the Environmental education processes within the Institution of Christian Church, and aims towards the complete moulding and making of man to 'ECO-MAN'. God loves the world and Christians are called to replicate God's love in our love for God, and our love for all that God has created. Although Church is major social actors and institutions with extensive accomplishments, but relatively no research has focused specifically on the interaction of environmental education through religious bodies. Thus, this study survey whether there is a link between faith and environmental values and understanding in Churches in Barak Valley, Assam. Using a descriptive questionnaire survey data was collected from the Church Leaders.

It was suggested that the situation of environmental theological education is poor within the Churches surveyed, and that this circumstances needs to be changed if the Church is to have a leadership role in reversing the human-induced basis of the environmental crisis.

KEYWORDS: Eco-man, Environmental Problems, Church, Environmental Education, Church Leaders.

INTRODUCTION

In all my years of attending Church or Religious Services or coming across others services from the time I could remember, I have never heard of a sermon preached on the subjects of environment issues, ecology, climate change, etc., which is related to the very existence of the humankind in particular. Is this because the subject salvation is important than the material world? Yes! Salvation is top priority but salvation exist only in the material world, which is been created by the God for the human (The Bible-Genesis Chapter-1 & 2) and therefore human salvation is through the Creation. The Creator has created the Creation, and was handed over to the man with blessing to subdue it and to have dominion over every living thing (The Bible-Genesis 1: v28) but not domination, and was given authority to till it and keep it (The Bible-Genesis 2: v15). Therefore it is the duty of man to preserve and sustain the creation that was and is Good (The Bible-Genesis 1) and not to abuse it while having being assigned the duty by the Lord God.

But the reality today is totally different to what was and is expected from us been the guardian of His Creation. We have ourselves reduce to the greed and sinned (The Bible-Romans 3: v23), this act of astray from His spirit, which was poured into us when He had created us, our spiritual being is unable to have that bond with God the Creator and we have been fallen short in every aspect of his love and adoration (ibid.). As our spiritual being has become impure and corrupt, our physical need and wants had led to unlimited desire indiscriminately, which has caused all the environmental problems.

Therefore, our disobedience, misinterpretation of stewardship to rule with domination and irresponsible behaviours has led to many environmental crises. There are many chains of environmental problems, we have created with our unthoughtful necessary development, and as such I feel it is necessary to discuss some of the main environmental crises that face humanity today, which require urgent attention.

Current environmental problems make us vulnerable to disasters and tragedies, now and in the future. Until we tackle them as early as possible, these various issues cautiously and seriously we are surely destined to ruin. Most importantly, the globally unprecedented surge in population is perhaps the most important crisis as an increase in the human population increases pressure to every resource available. This Explosive growth in human population causes a number of serious problems like food-scarcity, overcrowding, poverty, increasing consumption, encroachment on monuments, stress on common social facilities, stress on civic services etc. According to a new UN DESA report 2015, 'The current world population of 7.3 billion is expected to reach 8.5 billion by 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050 and 11.2 billion in 2100'. Maintaining prosperity and a quality life and personal freedoms will be imperiled (Pimentel and Pimentel (2003) 59:145-67; Pimentel et al. (1999) in Harper, Charles L. (2008)). Many Governmental and intergovernmental reports had highlighted the increasing agreement between the world's leading scientists that global warming is human-induced and very serious, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2007. Atkinson (2008) highlighted serious impacts of an average global temperature rise of 2-4°C rises this century as including: flooding affecting millions of people; the loss of wetlands; the death of coral reefs; and an increase in methane emissions into the atmosphere as permafrost melts. Houghton (2009) links future

freshwater shortages to an increase in global temperature. The rate of climate change will cause a serious detrimental impact on biodiversity. This is due to the inability of ecosystems to adapt to increasing temperatures, habitat loss due to agriculture, mining and expansion of human settlements and pollution.

There is no denying that, our environment is constantly changing, so do the need to become increasingly aware of the problems that surround it. Global warming has become an undisputed fact; our planet is warming up and we are definitely part of the problem. As rightly written by J. Houghton, 'Global warming is now a weapon of mass destruction', (2003). However, this isn't the only environmental problem that we should be concerned about. All across the world, people are facing a wealth of new and challenging environmental problems every day. Some of them are small and only affect a few ecosystems, but others are drastically changing the landscape of what we already know. Other major Current Environmental Problems are, Pollution of air, water and soil, and natural resource depletion, over consumption of resources and creation of plastics, extinction of species and habitats and loss of bio-diversity, deforestation, etc.

Need of Environmental Education

The surge in human population and its consequential environmental problems needs check, with different paradigm awareness programmes. Although, it has been broadly been established that to thorough the human society about the environmental issues and to make perspective plans for mitigation of environmental problems, an important tool through which the goals for awareness can be achieved easily is environmental education. The above discussed environmental issues force us to act towards saving the mother earth, by considering the importance of environmental conservation through the environmental education.

The most comprehensively defined and internationally recognized is propounded by the UNESCO. It reads, "Environmental education is a learning process that increases people's knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address the challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action" (UNESCO, Tbilisi Declaration, 1978). As such environmental education is a process for creating awareness and understanding about environmental issues that leads to responsible individual and to be action taker. This instead will make the process for change smoother that will promote critical thinking, problem solving, and effective decision-making skills among the masses. Thus, Environmental Education is about experiencing, sharing, inventiveness and sensitivity to environment.

Environmental Education takes into relation not only the education about ecology and how to protect naturally functioning environments, but also the wellbeing of humans in these environments. It aims at facilitating masses to implement and support sustainable development locally and globally. Education for sustainable development has become more and more important in this 21st century and can be viewed as an augmentor and amplifier of environmental education. In 2002, the United Nations decided to organize the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005 to 2014, in order to promote the value of respect to others and to nature as a basis of sustainable development. UNESCO website points out: "Education for Sustainable Development is not an option but a priority, and is everyone's business."

Environmental education is ingrained in the idea that humans can live together with nature and act justly toward each other. Another principal conviction is that public can make cultured decisions that consider future generations which aspires for an independent civilization in which effective, environmentally literate citizens participate with creativity and, thus promoting a sense of responsibility through. This assumption of responsibility by every individual plays a central role in the achievement of environmentally responsible behavior which encourages environmental literacy.

The Change of attitude, respect for creation, sense of responsibility and behavioural change for solving environmental issues are the broad basis of Environmental Education. Environmental education can be subjected to many phases and one the most imperative side of it is Religious institution (Church), through which successful campaign of Environmental education can be achieved.

EE through Church (Religious Institutions)

Religion is the oldest and most enduring social institutions, which directly influence majority of the world population (about 84 %) (UN-2015), while Christianity is about 32 % of 7.2 billion people. This continued high involvement of many of the population indicates that the priests and leaders have a significant opportunity to reach a large number of people with a faith-based message about climate change and other environmental issues. The Church as an institution has two dimensions:

A. Temporal: dealing with the affairs of this world.

B. Spiritual:

i) The Pastoral Care of souls.

ii) The preaching of the Gospel

iii) The sanctification of the People of God. (Cuadra, Pablo)

The above two dimensions directly connives towards the Creation welfare. Temporal part emphasizes for dealing with the affairs of this world, and this world consists of both Biotic and abiotic components of the environment. While the spiritual part deals, foremost with the preaching of the Gospel to the people, and the preaching is about the creation, for the creation and through the creation, the creation which was created by the Creator our lord Jesus Christ. Whereas sanctification is the blessing from and through Him for the creation, which include, us too, such that we the created can prosper and be sustain by his grace. But pastoral care is form of defined methodology for giving support and care, towards the distress, pain, loss, anxiety, joys, triumphs, etc for the suffering creation. These four points is the base for preaching, lessoning, sermon, etc, during prayer meeting, services, family worships, etc, which required to be utilized and is useful, however the aspect of environment in the Churches is absent and are neglected. Therefore, the Institution of the Churches has a central role and competence, because ecological alteration implies an integration of honest knowledge with the deeper meaning of things, humans with each other and with the rest of creation. As such Institution of the Church is the environmental educator and the platform for transcending the environmental cause as Church has wider coverage than any other sector.

Church (Environmental educators) have a unique opportunity to introduce environmental issues with Biblical bases for its every argument towards the environmental literacy during different programmes, services, preaching, prayer meetings, etc. with discussing beliefs underlining care for Creation and about ecological responsibility, which emphasizes to develop potential for faith communities to provide inspirational experiences and promotes reflection on how attitudes and action would improve quality of life for all, if not, the misery of this planet will continue and time will soon come when we won't survive this crisis and faces the wrath of God too.

Meanwhile, in recent years there has been increased interest in environmental theology and what the Christian faith has to say on environmental issues. There have also been numerous books and journal articles, devoted on environmental theology to environmental concerns to religion and environment, etc. Therefore the environmental attitudes and values of the religious leaders are of critically important, and those that are currently training are likely to have more time to consider about and reflect on the environmental issues facing the Church or our earth. Yet, our clergy, pastor and theologians, church leaders, etc., are still keeping mum and silent over these issues and only preach about heaven and salvation. The Bible clearly declares that God is the Creator (Genesis 1 & 2; 14:v22, Isaiah 40:v28; 42; v5), so when all these most ungodly activities are being perpetrated by his subjects to his Creation, will the Church and its leaders just stand by and watch? Is there really nothing in the Bible to be said against all these evils in our Lands? When will we ever search the scriptures and come up with Biblical injunctions and teachings to combat all these crises?

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the environmental literacy among the Church leaders in Barak valley, the southernmost part of Assam. There has however, been no research as yet on the circumstance of environmental literacy attitude among the Church leaders.

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions are exam-

ined: What is the responsibility of Religious Institutions Like Church in environmentalism? Is Religious Institutions, only delivering messages related to spiritual aspect? Can Church as an institution, be employed for the purposes of promoting the environmental education and literacy? Has the Church been slow to respond to the Environmental Crisis and its Management?

The hypothesis of the study is: "religious institution like Church is lagging in contributing towards environmental education and awareness".

METHODOLOGY

The investigator has used Descriptive survey Design for the study. The purpose of the descriptive design is to provide the perceptions and views of the respondents about the phenomenon studied (Burns & Grove, 2005). As a research strategy, its prime purpose is "to generate theory from data" (Punch, 2014). This is especially appropriate in a case such as the present study, in which no research has been done. Thus, this research approaches with the mixed method as fittingly stated by Bryman (1988) argued for a 'best of both worlds' approach and suggested that qualitative and quantitative approaches should be combined. A population of 13 (thirteen) Church denominations was taken for the present study in the Barak Valley the southernmost part of Assam, comprising three district of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Purposive sampling process was followed for data collection. Accordingly, 73 Questionnaires were distributed among Church Leaders, out of which, 46 become informants in the study. The questionnaire was principally based; on 'Why Church is silent on the issue of 'Environmental issues' and 'What Church has and can do', towards it's solution. The data obtained was analysed and interpreted with the help of both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

There were a total of 46 respondents who replied the questionnaire out of 73 samples, constituting a share of 63% responses; this is regarded as above average response of participation and therefore very reliable.

Table 1. Distribution of sample

Designation	Overall Distribution	
	#	%*
Pastor	25	54%
Bishop	0	0%
Evangelist	10	22%
Deacon	6	13%
Presbyter	0	0%
Missionary/Others	5	11%
Total	46	100%

*Please note: All the percentages are taken to nearest round figures.

Data analysis (De Vos 1998) entails that the analyst break down data into constituent parts to obtain answers to research questions and to test hypothesis. The results of the questionnaire were presented with the help of graphic representation for helpful data reading and interpretation. During this period of analysis, entries most often consisted of experimental charts,and data displays rather than narrative. Researchers are advised to "display data" to provide evidence for claims in a format readers can easily access (Creswell: 1998; Miles & Huberman: 1994). "The creation and use of displays is not separate from analysis, it is a part of analysis" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As rightly mentioned by LiMPETS Rocky Intertidal Monitoring Program: "A picture is worth a thousand words?" In science, the same is true of graphs. Complex ideas in science can be described with just one graph (2015). Since analysis took place throughout the research process, a study was shaped and reshaped as a study proceeded, and data was gradually transformed into findings. The purpose to analyze the data was to reduce them to an intelligible and interpretable form so that the relations of research problems can be studied and tested, and conclusions drawn.

The data collected by questionnaire served to limit and define issues that were important to understanding how these Church leaders had created or creates awareness and spreads environmentalism, through the communication link between the members and Church. This in turn provided a significant body of information that could be analysed in detail to reveal the state of eco-mission in Barak Valley and a possible eco-Church status for Barak valley.

WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULT

The questionnaire results showed that respondents profoundly think that Church as an institution has great role in creation care and responsibility for being the steward for the God's creation to preserve and sustain the life on the earth. The respondents also believe that Church has been slow in responding to the environmental crisis. Furthermore, they agree strongly that the responsibility was not being preserved by the Church towards the God's own earth. Results also illustrates that Church had only supported on faith related topics. Not a single leader had received training or done a course on environment, but majority of them

want to have strong base for development of quality leaders in the field of ecotheology, ecomission, etc., for the process of eco-literacy. There filled experiences and good contact will be boost for environmental education.

No action Church is solid, and lacks eagerness towards tackling the problems. Although it finds a strong level of responsibility in the environmental context with themselves. As such, my argument in hypothesis found supported after questionnaire discussion.

For this survey, consequently, it does not allow any conclusions on whether or not affiliation to environmental education is designation-related. But they can be assumed to be more influential in the issue than the lay members, by their position in the society. As Churches are more effective and are more respected widely in communities.

However, it is recognisable a consequent pattern which can be identified that experience leaders could be expected to be actively participants towards the research aim for practical mission. Therefore, this pool of experiences can be exploited to generate power for the establishing firm stand on saving the creation, with more specific training and guidance while using the platform of the Church.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that there is a need to recognize the importance of religious institution for the environmental obligation. While the religious institution needs to scrutinize their base of foundation, actions and its responsibility towards the Gods' creation. In a very profound sense, the Church in the eco-crisis is in a very public place but is lagging in its duties and responsibilities.

There are obstacles to development of conscience on the promotion of sustainable development and environmental stewardship due to the lack of trained human resources as the leaders were trained in faith-based area only and consequently providing anthropocentric sermons. Another fine and interesting point is ignorance and ignorance is a problem in itself therefore NGOs, Government organizations, Environmental departments, etc, need to reach out and involve the Church as these are well established, defined and well managed institutions, which can certainly provide positive participation. While, the best of religious environmentalism is that it possesses to contain alternate approach in formation of the human-environment relationship.

While in many ways eco-mission is neglected, this study confirmed that Churches and congregations around should be active members by becoming socially environmentally conscience and use the Church as a platform for environmental education and make their members environmental literate and help them to develop environmental outlook. Thus creating a complete man, i.e. "ECO-MAN".

In conclusion, the Churches in Barak valley of different denominations are lagging as a role model for providing environmental education to it masses. While Bible has over thousand of texts, available with references on earth, the churches has failed to use it in proper channel to make their members environmental aware and literate. There are different approaches, such as stewardship, dominion, partnership, etc., these will present the opportunities for the Churches at different level to overcome the implication of creation theology, i.e., in practical mission of the Church. But most importantly there is a need to re-think biblical hermeneutics, as dominant hermeneutical assumption has been, in many respects remains human-focused. So, need of hermeneutical perspective from a human to an earth focus is essential, in understandings new possible environmental base of biblical texts.

Furthermore, as stated earlier responses in questionnaire had given a firm base to approve the hypothesis of this study. On the entire illustration the questions of this research have been supported by the respondent's responses. This affirms the need of accountability of Church and their need to understand their responsibilities they possess towards God's creation, while fully involving the religious institution for creation care. Church leaders must be trained with an aim towards the environment campaigner as they been in the position of influencing the members, and can be a deciding factor. Though Church has been inattentiveness; now is the right hour to make Church as the apposite platform for transforming the society through inclusive of different approaches to overcome the problems of the earth.

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